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ABSTRACT

Research may be divided into two types, "empowering" research and "academic" research. Empowering research seeks to determine how a particular individual or organization can produce a desired result, while academic research is concerned with why a particular condition exists. While academic research might ask "Why do students drop out of school?" empowering research asks "How can a student be enabled to persist?" In addition, academic research attempts to be objective, while empowering research is admittedly and necessarily subjective. Empowering research involves the assumption of responsibility. For example, a college which seeks to reduce student attrition can empower itself to do so by assuming responsibility for student dropout. Both academic and empowering research may examine issues at two different levels: at the student (individual) level and at the institutional (system) level. In the case of student dropout research, research at the individual level is concerned with the student's choice to persist or drop out, while research at the organizational level is concerned with the college's attrition rate. For the most part, the research literature on dropouts has consisted exclusively of academic explanations at the individual level. Thus, many studies have left the impression that little can be done by colleges to retain more students to graduation. Researchers who distinguish between the different types and levels of research can better utilize the combinations that most empower them and their institution to address specific problems and achieve desired outcomes. (JMC)

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Empowering Research

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Since a research pervasive environment is based upon research, it makes sense to inquire about the types of research that would be the most useful. And since research can involve explanations at various levels, it makes sense to distinguish these levels so that the most appropriate level is used in a given situation.

This essay will distinguish two types and two levels of research. One type of research is more useful for colleges and its members than the other as a basis for decisions and action. The interaction of the two levels of research with the two types of research produces four quite different research questions. These distinctions and their interactions will be illustrated by aspects of research on student dropout.

Research may be divided into two types, empowering research and (for lack of a better name) academic research. It is empowering research that can be expected to be most useful to college decision-makers, be they governing board members, administrators, or faculty and other staff.

The two types of research differ in several ways (see Figure 1). First, each type asks a different question. Academic research asks *why* something is the way it is or behaves the way it behaves. For example, the research literature on school and college student dropout has been basically academic in nature since its fundamental research question has been 'Why do students drop out of school/college?' Research on learning and teaching might ask, 'Why aren't students learning?' or 'Why does this method work better than that method?'

The why question of academic research contrasts with the *how* question of empowering research. Empowering research seeks an answer to the question of *how* a particular individual or organization (an agent) can produce a specified result. Empowering research is explicitly and fundamentally action oriented. It wants to know how a result can be accomplished, rather than why things are the way they are. For example, empowering research on student dropout might ask, 'How can a student be enabled to persist in college?'

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Figure 1

Academic vs. Empowering Research

Academic Research	Empowering Research
Asks "Why?"	Ask "How?"
Has an Objective Perspective	Has a Subjective Perspective
Focuses on Causes	Focuses on Responsibility
Involves Explanation	Involves Empowerment

It might seem at first, say in connection with student dropout research, that the distinction between why and how research questions is not substantial. After all, much of the research in student dropout that could be considered academic research has been motivated by a desire to determine how to keep students in school or college. While this is true, nevertheless, the form the research question takes, explicitly or implicitly, in contrast to the motivation for the research, affects the structure and nature of the research and its ultimate usefulness to decision-makers. This should become clearer with the examination of other dimensions of difference between empowering and academic research.

The second way in which empowering and academic research differ is that academic research attempts to be objective, while empowering research is admittedly and necessarily subjective. Academic research attempts to take a perspective that is *outside* or above, as it were, the system or phenomena being studied. Empowering research takes up a perspective *within* the system being studied. In particular, it takes up the perspective of the agent to be empowered and considers the characteristics and circumstances of that agent, and the particular result to be produced by that agent.

Suppose, for example, that a college wishes to retain a higher percentage of its entering students to graduation. Academic research, from its outside objective perspective, has shown that student dropout is related to ethnicity, parents' educational attainment, socioeconomic status, personality and other characteristics of the student. Yet while these correlates are valid and may in a sense explain student dropout, such explanations don't seem to have empowered colleges to retain more students. They only seem to explain why they are leaving.

Empowering research sees this issue from the point of view of the college, taking into account its characteristics and circumstances and its desire to retain more students. From this subjective perspective, variables are classified as within or outside the college's control. If a variable is not within the college's control, it is considered not directly relevant to the research. For example, ethnicity would not be directly relevant because knowing ethnicity is related to persistence doesn't directly empower a college to improve its retention rate unless it is prepared not to admit those from ethnic groups with lower persistence rates.

Consequently, empowering research searches for variables within the agent's control that affect student retention. Thus, if Black students drop out at a greater rate than White students, empowering research wants to know what it is within the college's control - in short, what it is about the college - that explains or causes this. Since the dropout rate of Black students is a function of the *interaction* of the characteristics of Blacks and the characteristics of the college - a given college will affect different students differently and different colleges will affect a given student differently - student characteristics are not irrelevant to empowering retention research. While they are not directly relevant, they are indirectly quite relevant.

Empowering retention research seeks to learn how the college's controllable variables affect its particular kind of students. Thus, you might say that empowering research seeks to learn how to fix the college, rather than how to fix the student. It asks what is it about the college that results in Blacks dropping out faster than Whites, and how can it be fixed, rather than what is it about Black students that explains their higher dropout rate, and how can the college help them.

The third way in which empowering and academic research differ is that empowering research focuses on responsibility while academic research focuses on causes. An agent empowers itself with respect to some problem by taking responsibility for it. For example, a college might assume responsibility for its low student retention rates. Note that while it is possible to assign blame with the word 'responsibility', as in accusing someone of being responsible for an accident, the sense of responsibility intended here does not include blame or its companion, shame.

In order to be empowered, an agent must take, or assume, responsibility for a problem or circumstance. Assuming responsibility, in both a logical and practical sense, opens for exploration a domain of relationships between the agent and the problem that might otherwise go entirely unnoticed.

A college desiring to reduce student attrition can simply and profoundly empower itself to do so by assuming responsibility for student dropout and by conceptualizing itself as responsible for, perhaps even the cause of, student dropout. If an agent can be seen as a cause of a problem, it thereby has the power to affect the problem and is thus empowered with respect to it.

A college's assumption of responsibility for its student attrition rate does not imply that students are not responsible for their own success in school. The logic of responsibility is different from the logic of objective causes. An agent is responsible for something to the degree that the agent is willing to assume responsibility for it. The greater the assumption of responsibility, the greater the power the agent will discover it has to transform or change the situation.

An inspiring example of this self-fulfilling dynamic is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He declared, and acted consistently with his declaration, that he would be responsible for realizing the dream that men and women not be judged by the color of their skin, but only by the quality of their character. This declaration deprived no one else of responsibility. In fact, it inspired others to be responsible for the same dream. Likewise, a college can declare itself responsible for its attrition rate, and at the same time, urge students to accept responsibility for their choices and success.

Such logic cannot be incorporated within academic research. In fact, responsibility in any form is excluded from academic research because such research only specifies causes. Causes cannot be responsible for their effects; only human beings and human organizations can. It has been argued, in fact, that the emergence of scientific academic explanations for human phenomena has coincided with a decline in acknowledgement of personal and corporate responsibility. Using objective scientific explanations, people have assigned their undesirable behavior or effects to causes outside themselves in a manner akin to the claim that "the devil made me do it".

It is interesting to note, in this connection, a general pattern in the literature on dropping out. Those who work for schools -- administrators and teachers -- tend to suggest that student-related characteristics explain drop out, while dropouts themselves suggest that it is school and teacher characteristics that explain their leaving. Each blames the other. Perhaps neither accepts responsibility.

A few years ago, an attrition study of a large public urban school district was released by an independent research group. A school district official's response to that study provides an example of a disempowering stance. The study reported an enrollment ratio attrition rate of 53% for the 1980 freshman class over their four years of high school. The official, described as the director of the district's dropout-prevention program, was quoted as saying, "I've been dealing with dropouts for 20 years, and I think the reasons for dropping out are mostly correlated with problems at home. The best way to improve education for kids is to have parents educated." However true this may be, the stance implicit in this official's response disempowers him and his district from preventing dropout and lowering attrition rates. The "reasons", after all, for dropping out are outside the district's control.

Fourth and finally, empowering and academic research differ in that empowering research seeks to empower while academic research seeks to explain and predict. Empowering research seeks to understand the agent and its characteristics and circumstances in a way that empowers it to produce a specific result. Empowerment, in a direct sense, is irrelevant to academic research. It seeks to explain something.

Both types of research are valid and useful in their own domains. The test of academic research is whether it has discovered the truth. The test of empowering research is whether it has discovered what works. Successful empowering dropout research discovers what *reduces* student attrition, not merely what explains why students drop out.

In addition to conducting one of these two types of research, researchers in a research pervasive environment can make use of the distinction between levels of research to empower themselves, their institution, and others to produce results. Research may be conducted at the individual level, or it may be conducted at the organizational or system level.

In the case of student dropout research, for example, research at the individual level concerns the student's *choice* to persist or drop out. On the other hand, dropout research at the organizational level concerns the college's attrition *rate*. While the variables of choice and rate are obviously related, the distinction is important. Actions and theories appropriate for one level are not usually appropriate at another.

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction of the distinctions between types and levels of research in terms of four basic student dropout research questions. Academic research at the individual level asks, 'Why does a student drop out?' Possible answers to this question include the whole range of student characteristics such as ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Empowering research at the individual level asks, 'How can individual students be empowered to stay in college?' Possible answers include courses in 'How to Be a Master Student'. Academic research at the organizational or system level asks, 'Why does this college have this attrition rate?' Possible answers to this question include the quality of students admitted as represented by SAT scores and the ethnic and socioeconomic makeup of the student body. Finally, empowering research at the system level asks, 'How can this college decrease its dropout rate?' Possible answers include the quality of learning and teaching that occurs in the classroom and the ability of faculty to relate effectively to students of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

For the most part, the research literature on dropout has consisted almost exclusively of academic explanations at the individual level. Advice to students often takes the perspective of empowering an individual student to persist. However, there has been little substantive research in this area. Within the past decade, researchers have increasingly turned their attention to academic explanations at the system level and more recently, some researchers and commentators have concerned themselves with empowering schools and colleges to improve their dropout rates. The latter researchers have proposed theories that involve an "interactive" relationship between the system level and the individual level in which each level has responsibilities for and effects on the other.

Figure 2

Four Student Dropout Research Questions

		Types of Research	
		Academic	**Empowering**
Levels of Research	**Individual (Student)**	Why does a student drop out?	How can a student be anabled to stay in school?
	System (College)	Why does a college have this dropout rate?	How can a college decrease its dropout rate?

Generally, researchers of student attrition have been unaware of distinctions between levels and types of research and have often produced results confusing to readers by shifting unconsciously among them. For example, a research project may be conducted with the intent to assist colleges in retaining students but the theoretical structure and findings are couched in academic terms, leaving little in the findings that empowers colleges to retain more students. Consequently, many studies leave the impression that little can be done by colleges to retain more students to graduation since so much of what causes it is outside the college's control. For this reason, much of the research on student attrition is of little utility in preventing it.

The same fate may befall research for the sake of a wide variety of institutional and educational issues, unless researchers at community college campuses are aware of and make use of the distinctions between types and levels of research.

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